

A group of citizens seeking to rebuild pillars of social justice in the lives of local residents gathered this evening to highlight the progress being made in their communities and to discuss strategies for further addressing these issues both locally and nationally.

— Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) joined members of the Darby Area NAACP at the First African Baptist Church of Sharon Hill for the group's Annual Freedom Fund Dinner. In his address, Congressman Sestak spoke on the historic importance of the NAACP, an organization whose hard work and perseverance have resulted in improvements of the lives of millions of Americans over the decades since its inception in 1909.

"Looking back throughout our history as a nation, we see that time and time again, we have had the courage, as a country, to look ourselves in the national mirror and to say 'we are better than this,'" noted the Congressman. "Whether it was the fight for a woman's right to vote, or the fight to end segregation and discrimination, we have had the strength at each of these moments to say that 'this is not who we are; we are better than this.'"

The Congressman also spoke about one of the most moving moments he encountered while serving in the White House as Director of Defense Policy for President Clinton. A great wrong was righted one day when seven African-American World War II veterans were awarded the Medal of Honor. Until that day, no African American had ever been given that honor, despite heroism and valor equal to any Medal of Honor recipient. While some medals were awarded posthumously, other veterans attended the White House ceremony.

One of the veterans was 77-year-old Lt. Vernon Baker, who bravely wiped out three enemy machine gun nests, an observer post and dugout during an assault on a mountain stronghold in Italy. When asked about the lack of social justice he encountered when he returned home after serving his country overseas, Lt. Baker said: "Give respect before you expect it, treat people the way you want to be treated, remember the mission, set the example, keep going."

Congressman Sestak said that the words of Lt. Baker set a great example from which Americans can continue to learn. With perseverance, hard work, and respect, citizens can help right social wrongs. He further noted that because of the work of the NAACP, racial hatred and discrimination no longer have any place in American society. "There is no place for prejudice here. Our country's strength lies in its diversity," he said. "From working towards equality in education to fighting for voting rights, groups like the NAACP have united citizens, bolstered our resolve and thus strengthened our national security."

He further highlighted the important role of education as a key component in rebuilding the walls of social justice. To that end, the Congressman said that it was critical that federal education dollars are dedicated to the communities that need them most, providing students with the classroom materials and curriculum they need and ensuring a higher level of teacher retention.

The Congressman, who cosponsored and voted for bipartisan legislation honoring the 98th anniversary of the NAACP, also presented a Congressional Record Citation to Carol A. Wiley and Ronald Scott Young, two longtime members of the Darby Area NAACP, for their commitment to education and social justice.

The keynote speaker for the event was Richard P. Burton, Sr., a member of the NAACP National Board of Directors and former Pennsylvania State NAACP President, spoke on 'Rebuilding the Walls of Social Justice.' He focused on the need to build our communities, "one block, one family and one child at a time." Mr. Burton is currently the director of PROJECT R.E.A.C.H., a non-profit organization that helps disenfranchised communities, families and children by emphasizing educational empowerment as well as drug abuse and violence prevention.

"I was honored to attend the Freedom Fund Dinner," said Congressman Sestak. "Both Richard Burton and the NAACP exhibit the type of leadership that has truly enhanced the lives of the underserved in our district and our nation at large. I applaud Mr. Burton's efforts to serve at-risk communities with PROJECT R.E.A.C.H. and thank him for his tremendous history of public service."

*Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the Congress.*